

New Call for Closer Oversight

This week, there were already indications of a new relationship between Congress and the intelligence agencies. Representative Louis Stokes, Democrat of Ohio and the incoming chairman of the House Permanent Select Intelligence Committee, announced he had drafted legislation to forbid the President to keep a covert operation secret from Congress for more than 48 hours. In the covert dealings with Iran, Government lawyers concluded that existing statutes permitted Mr. Reagan to delay notification of Congress for nearly a year.

Mr. Stokes's bill would also bar any oral "findings" by the President authorizing covert action, requiring instead that all such decisions be approved in writing with copies given to all the members of the National Security Council. Mr. Gates himself will have to resolve a sharp split within the intelligence community. Under Mr. Casey, the agency has actively pursued support for anti-Communist insurgencies, in Angola and Afghanistan, for example, as well as Nicaragua. Many longtime intelligence professionals contend that such operations cannot be kept secret long and that they inevitably drag the C.I.A. into questionable activities.

Legislators and Administration officials agree that, despite Congressional feuding with Mr. Casey over such covert operations as the mining of Nicaraguan harbors, the committees have given intelligence agencies substantial support in recent years. Because of Mr. Casey's close ties to Mr. Reagan and because of a consensus in Congress that a rebuilding was needed, spending for intelligence agencies has increased even more than military spending.

Members of Congress are asking, however, whether the intelligence agencies are spending their money wisely. A report this week by the House Intelligence Committee harshly criticizes the intelligence agencies for "dangerous laxities" in security and personnel policies. In particular, the report notes that Edward Lee Howard was hired by the agency despite a history of hard drug use and was given access to highly sensitive information during his probation period. He is believed to have devastated the C.I.A.'s Moscow station by describing it to the Russians.